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UNH's Forest Watch Honors Monadnock Regional High School Teacher With Annual Award

May 27, 2010

From left to right, Forest Watch program coordinator Mike Gagnon, Gerald Babonis, and Barry Rock

DURHAM, N.H. – Gerald Babonis of Monadnock Regional High School received the 2009 Gary N. Lauten Award for outstanding service and commitment to the University of New Hampshire's

Forest Watch program at a ceremony held last week on the Durham campus. Babonis has been involved in Forest Watch since 2000.

Forest Watch, which began in 1991, is a unique way of conducting science with the help of primary and secondary school students across New England who collect and process data relating to air pollution damage in forest stands near their schools. Since its inception in 1991, over 350 schools have participated in the program, with some 50 to 100 actively engaged in monitoring white pines, a bio-indicator species for ground-level ozone (smog), in any given year.

Babonis has been sampling two research plots with his sophomore biology students annually for 10 years and, notes Forest Watch program coordinator Mike Gagnon, "Jerry and his students provide us with maybe the most detailed and accurate data from his Forest Watch plots as any school in the program."

For 19 years, Forest Watch has demonstrated that students can collect valuable data for ongoing scientific research and learn science and mathematics by doing research in their local area. Student data have clearly shown how responsive white pines are to year-to-year variations in ozone levels. NASA's New Hampshire Space Grant Consortium (<http://www.nhsgc.sr.unh.edu>) has sponsored Forest Watch since 1991.

"Over the years, I've been very impressed with how well student data mirror annual variations in air quality," says Forest Watch director Barry Rock of the university's Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space and the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment. "During a poor air quality summer, student data indicate poor tree health, but during a good air quality summer the data indicate improved tree health."

Gary Lauten was a former Air Force lieutenant colonel who died in December 2001 and served as the Forest Watch program coordinator from 1992-1999. In 2002, the program began recognizing teachers who best exemplify Lauten's devotion to Forest Watch's long-term goals.

"This award recognizes Gary's commitment to making science accessible in the pre-college classroom. He loved the program and became its heart and soul," says Rock. "Teachers love the program because it integrates biology with physics, math, Earth science, etcetera."

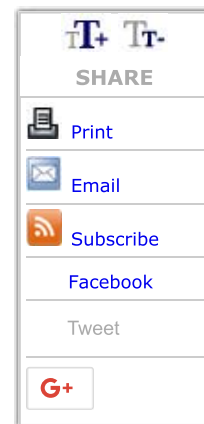
Says Babonis, "As teachers, we all spend our days in instruction, hoping to light a spark in students. For some of my students over the last decade Forest Watch was that spark. A number of them have gone on to study biology or environmental science in college."

For more information on Forest Watch, go to <http://www.forestwatch.sr.unh.edu>.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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Photo available to download: http://www.eos.unh.edu/newsimage/lauten_group_lg.jpg



Caption: From left to right, Forest Watch program coordinator Mike Gagnon, Gerald Babonis, and Barry Rock.

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